



---

**Françoise Mengin and Jean-Louis Rocca eds.,  
Politics in China: Moving Frontiers**

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, 261 p.

**Lynn T. White**

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/779>  
ISSN: 1996-4617

**Publisher**

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 December 2003  
ISSN: 2070-3449

**Electronic reference**

Lynn T. White, « Françoise Mengin and Jean-Louis Rocca eds., Politics in China: Moving Frontiers », *China Perspectives* [Online], 50 | november- december 2003, Online since 20 April 2007, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/779>

---

This text was automatically generated on 28 October 2019.

© All rights reserved

---

# Françoise Mengin and Jean-Louis Rocca eds., *Politics in China: Moving Frontiers*

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, 261 p.

Lynn T. White

---

- 1 Mengin and Rocca have assembled a strikingly international set of researchers. Four of the ten chapters' authors work in France, and they do us the service (as more generally does *China Perspectives*) of bringing to us in English important theoretical concerns salient among China scholars in continental Europe—although this book also includes contributors who work in America, Japan, Britain and Hong Kong.
- 2 No book brings out the paradoxes of China's recent reforms more clearly. No other goes further in elucidating these contradictions, even though the editors explicitly deny any intention of developing a consistent framework for understanding the country's recent transformation. China remains China, while also it modernises.
- 3 The editors acknowledge having “tried to escape two mainstream approaches, the culturalist approach and the functionalist/evolutionist approach”. They do so only partly, of course, using two means explicit in their title: politics and frontiers. Of China's diverse national-cultural options that remain alive, those that endure best are supported politically—by local or by state politics. When modern change takes place, it likewise has official or unofficial political backing. The frontiers between concepts such as state and non-state, cosmopolitan and Chinese, politics and economics are both used and problematised by the authors.
- 4 In many of this book's sections, the framework is centred on the solid old notion of social class. It would be invidious to criticise the chapters one by one, because any serious student of contemporary China should read them all. An aim in this review is to give readers a sense of the chapters' variety and the book's editorial unity. The subtitle, *Moving Frontiers*, is partly metaphorical. These authors suggest the need for clear lines between analytic categories, although such boundaries are on planes. Wealth and power generate new spaces for either contention or co-operation. Tension between

class analysis and analyses based on other kinds of political groups pervades many chapters here and creates many of the “frontiers”. Other borders are not metaphorical at all, as in Grant Evans's chapter about China's southern frontiers, or Françoise Mengin's about Taiwan firms in the China market.

- 5 To begin with one of the non-spatial examples, property rights were once considered crucial for reform, but various writers here suggest that property rights, political connections, social prestige, occupational position, and wealth all depend on each other. These resources can be analytically fenced off, but in practice they can often be converted into other types. It would be inadequate to suggest, as analysts in many other books do, that just one of these, such as property rights, determined all the rest.
- 6 Yet the power of capital over labour is a recurrent theme of the book in many chapters. Jean-Louis Rocca provides data on China's urban unemployment, underemployment and poverty. The unemployment rate is probably 15% or 17% in cities. “Foreign”, mostly Hong Kong and Taiwan, styles of management and taylorisation have spread from coastal economic zones to widely dispersed places, where the income gap between rich and poor has ballooned. In China, as in richer “post-industrial” countries, workers are increasingly shunted into petty or temporary jobs. China's public sector has absorbed the work force's new employees in commerce particularly, and it mostly offers them paltry wages.
- 7 To make more money, state capitalists legitimate their policies in terms of apparently non-state institutions, especially “the market”, of which they construct a politically useful image. Plans to lay off workers are now disguised, under China's weak residual communism, as apolitical consequences of market forces. Dorothy Solinger shows the rhetorical pretense that hides China's new plans, under which cadres value economic efficiency more than proletarian jobs. Her Wuhan data document the “re-employment centers” that fail to find jobs for their laid-off clients. This is planning, but for capital not workers. It is state capitalism run by a formally socialist (certainly Leninist) party. Here the frontiers do not just move; they are blurred in ways that follow logics set forth long ago by Karl Polanyi, an author whose will to see the differences between analytic and concrete categories underlie many of this book's chapters.
- 8 Tak-Wing Ngo similarly details the Hong Kong government's new “pro-active” schemes for development. Officials there now call for “accountability”, which is supposed to replicate the effects of a market, although it is in fact state planning. Britain's previous regime there had some contacts with tycoons, but the new Hong Kong government's aid to the “Cyberport” project of Li Ka-shing's son makes the old colonialists look almost *laissez-faire*.
- 9 David L. Wank likewise describes Xiamen's “rentier entrepreneurs”, who depend on access to and resources from the state. Wank explores the periods in which different cohorts of people converted the social capital available to them, to become entrepreneurs. He distinguishes four successive waves of these rising local economic leaders (former speculators without business licences, former workers in collectives, former enterprise functionaries who often had overseas connections, and former state cadres). Different new entrepreneurs, despite their diversity and rivalry, have formed business connections in the market. Their complementarity there has legitimated them together, although China's new middle class is very plural. It is still mostly local. It is not proletarian.

- 10 Much of this capital is unofficial. Many non-state networks (clans, clubs, communities and companies) are in effect treated as political by several of these authors. They exchange power, as well as money and prestige. Ideas from Pierre Bourdieu seem to pervade several chapters here, and they make a good contribution to Chinese studies. Gilles Guiheux finds that Taiwan's boom depended far less on the state than did Japan's or South Korea's, and perhaps implicitly China's. The island's boom came largely from small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which had little or no official help. SMEs benefitted when the state helped an export drive for manufactures, but they did this indirectly, e.g. by subcontracting.
- 11 Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, writing about the countryside, also explore "new actors and spaces, outside the formal organs of power". The authors who mainly use data from cities (Solinger, Guiheux and others when writing about people who depend on the state) do not emphasise "power beyond instituted power", as Thireau and Hua do. Those who stress cities and state enterprises may underreport the different and more prosperous petty tyrannies in small and medium-sized suburban firms. This tension mostly depends on whether one studies urban or rural areas. No hypothesis about China is true everywhere in that big country. One advantage of an edited anthology is that the authors need not be totally consistent. To their credit, these are not. The cities are more important in immediate political terms, so that emphasis is a good predictor of state policies if not of local policies.
- 12 Ching Kwan Lee and Delia Davin add a new theme about perceptions to the colloquy of the book. Lee points out that repressed ex-peasant workers "come to encounter these [exploitative] forces with a history of personal dependence, against which commodified labour is interpreted and experienced as providing personal liberation and independence". Several of the chapters describe this sort of "contradictory consciousness" about reforms. Davin likewise shows how migration "turned previously dependent young women, who had been worth little in economic terms, into earners" who could partly negotiate their terms of work. They also affected attitudes in the rural areas to which they often returned, where most Chinese still live.
- 13 The spatial, unmetaphorical kind of "frontier" returns as a major theme in the last two chapters, although it is never wholly separated from the conceptual kind of border. Grant Evans, writing about China's southern fringe, shows how the new tourist economy, e.g. in the Xishuangbanna region, presses frontiers of sexual morals and religious toleration too. As Mengin suggests, the frontier across the Taiwan Strait in the 1990s "moved", in part because it mixed economics and politics. Some Taiwanese business tycoons, who might otherwise have been more independence-minded, have at least delayed those norms in order to make money on the mainland. Some PRC conservatives, seeing the role of Taiwan capital in aiding the economic legitimacy of their ex-Communist Party, have acquired reasons to delay their claims to the island.
- 14 The editors have constructed a book that reinstates class analysis as a serious calling in contemporary Chinese studies, while challenging analytic distortions created by narrow use of that or any other approach. *Politics in China* will be widely used as a textbook, especially in seminars. It should be read by everyone.